

Breakout: Life Skills Training and Incorporation of Cultural Competence Techniques

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This outreach breakout session examined life skills training to determine if and how cultural competence can be incorporated into broader worker training programs.

At the outset of the session, participants were asked to engage in a small group activity entitled “Take a Step - Double Reverse.” Participants were then asked to stand in a straight line. The facilitator posed a series of statements to the participants. Many of these statements were drafted from the experiences of the facilitators and after reviewing the results posed from the following statement to the workshop audience: Define in your own words the terms “culture and diversity.” If the statement pertained to the participant (i.e. if the statement were true), the participant was asked to either take a step forward or backward, until the set of questions was finished. An example of a question used in this exercise was: “If your parents bought your first car, take a step backward,” or “If you did not attend college, take a step forward.” At the end of the exercise, participants were then divided into three groups depending on their place in the room (those farthest back, those in the middle, and those farthest forward). Each group was asked to take ten minutes to create a list of things they all had in common with one another. The entire group then came together to read their lists and participants were asked to discuss the process of creating their lists and the perceptions that other groups had of the lists created by other teams.

Several observations were made about the process itself and the commonalities of group members. For example, the group that had stepped furthest back in line tended to be the youngest on average, and had experienced the greatest number of privileges, as far as education level, travel, opportunity, etc. Another group noted that they were all “Baby Boomers,” and felt that their commonality list was more sentimental and meaningful versus the superficial characteristics (travel, food preferences, education) that they felt bonded the “youngest” group. Finally, one observer in the third group noted that although they had a very difficult time identifying any commonalities, once they stripped the obvious, superficial layers away, he realized that many of them were actually very much alike.

In general, this exercise was meant to convey the importance of teaching trainers to understand why they think as they do – why we perceive others as we do; why we make certain assumptions; why our perceptions are molded by the culture to which we belong. This way of thinking – these layers of thought – were referred to as “cultural baggage.” Everybody has many layers of culture that influence the person that they are and they way that they think and identify themselves in relation to others.

Myra Lewis explained that Xavier has sometimes found it necessary to adjust their training program to account for certain cultural aspects. For example, trainers have

incorporated life skills training to help students understand the reason for their behaviors – such as wearing pants low and baggy, or playing into an accepted “machismo” attitude. As part of this training, the trainer explains both the origin of the behavior, why it is accepted among a certain cultural group, and also how others perceive the behavior through their own cultural lens. Students are encouraged to try to understand how and why their own behaviors may be confusing to others and why it is sometimes necessary to therefore adapt to situations according to the cultural norms of a given environment (i.e. office environment vs. home vs. street).

Breakout participants were encouraged to consider these messages and apply them in their own life by immersing themselves in a new environment that challenges them to strip away their own “cultural baggage” and adjust or adapt to the surrounding setting.